

Borne the Battle Episode # 221

Air Force Veteran Mark Harper, President and CMO of We Are the Mighty

<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/81447/borne-battle-221-air-force-veteran-mark-harper-president-mighty/>

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] Music

[00:00:09] OPENING MONOLOGUE:

Tanner Iskra (TI): Oh, let's get it. Monday, November 23rd, 2020. Borne the Battle - brought to you by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The podcast that focuses on inspiring veteran stories and puts a highly on important resources, offices, and benefits for our veterans. I am your host Marine Corps, veteran Tanner Iskra. Hope everyone had a great week outside of podcast land. Myself, I'm trying out some new gear, got some new gear from the office. Don't have it quite soundproofed here in the home studio. So, it might sound a little echoey. It's funny how it's a better, better microphone, but it's a worse quality based on the room. So, we're going to manage and we're going to keep pressing on

No new reviews this week to respond to - no new ratings. If you like what we put together every week, please consider smashing that subscribe button and leaving a rating and, or a review on Apple Podcasts. It helps push this podcast up in the algorithms. Which gives more veterans the chance to catch the information provided not only in the interviews, but in the benefits breakdown episodes and in the news releases.

Talking news releases, we have six this week, some are pretty brief, so it was not going to be, as long as you'd think. Unless I keep running my suck. All right. First one, it says for immediate release, the US Department of Veterans Affairs announced recently it published an interim rule affirming VA's current policy, allowing VA health care professionals to practice across state lines in accordance with the scope and requirements of their VA employment, regardless of conflicting state requirements. This regulation allows VA the flexibility to mobilize and hire required healthcare professionals from any state and quickly place them in areas of need, which is especially important during COVID-19. This regulation confirms that VA's healthcare professionals are able to practice where they're needed most regardless of state license, certification, registration, or other

requirement, including professional supporting assignments for VA's fourth mission, or staffing smaller rural locations, including mobile health units. Since the start of the pandemic, VA has deployed more than 3000 healthcare professionals to 47 States and the District of Columbia. They have served at civilian facilities, the Indian Health Service, state veteran homes, and other VA medical facilities affected by COVID-19. These efforts help veterans and their communities by rapidly moving staff and equipment to assist various parts of the country experiencing serious and critical shortages of healthcare resources. This regulation ensures a VA can continue to serve veterans and support national state and local emergency management, public health, safety and homeland security efforts. Members of the public may comment on this interim final rule so long as it is received on or before January 11th of 2021. You can voice your opinion, you can voice your dissatisfaction with the rule, however you want to voice it. And you can do that at www.regulations.gov [Link] and search for the RIN, number, at 2900-AQ94 A as is an alpha, Q as in Quebec, nine-four.

Okay. Second one says for immediate release, as part of an ongoing effort to prevent veteran suicide, US Department of Veterans Affairs recently announced a new partnership with a nonprofit organization, *America Salutes You*, to raise awareness of mental health resources for service members, veterans, and their loved ones. The partnership will promote, VA's "Be There" campaign and share suicide prevention resources through videos, public service announcements, and broadcast events, streaming online and airing on television networks across the country. Through this partnership, *America Salutes You* will host concerts and events to educate veterans and their loved ones about suicide prevention with an emphasis on access to VA care. As part of VA's national strategy for preventing veteran suicide, these events use a public health approach to reach veterans in their communities and aim to raise awareness about mental health, social determinants of suicide and suicide prevention, resources through social media and streaming services. And as always, any veteran who is in crisis or having thoughts of suicide, or if you know a veteran in crisis, you can call the Veteran's Crisis Line at +1 800-273-8255 and press one for confidential support 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. You can also send a text message to 838255 or chat online at [veteranscrisisline.net/chat](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/chat) [Link: <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/chat>].

Okay, the next one says for immediate release, as part of the US Department of Veterans Affairs fight against COVID-19, the department recently announced its nationwide effort to recruit volunteers for

COVID-19 clinical trials at select VA facilities across the country. That's right. If you listen to this podcast, you would know that we did cover this in a bonus episode, our last bonus episode, a couple of weeks back, where we talked about these clinical trials. So, Borne the Battle is getting the information weeks before the press release. I like it. More than 50 VA medical centers are participating in trials to test vaccines and treatments for COVID-19. Vaccines being studied by VA include candidates to by Moderna, AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Janssen, and they're in clinical trials for various treatments and vaccines. Now, if you go to that last bonus COVID Update episode, Dr. Molly Klote is an Army Veteran, and she is the one in charge of volunteer safety for the VA. And she dispelled plenty of myths about the trials, how they're administered, nobody's going to force exposure, or they're not going to put, any of the virus in you or anything like that. Basically, you take the vaccine, and you go about your life and you come in for updates. Also, in the blog for the episode, on [blogs.va.gov](https://www.blogs.va.gov) [Link: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/>], you can find the volunteer list and get more information about COVID-19 trials and research studies.

Okay. Next one says for immediate release, the US Department of Veterans Affairs, recently released the VA Customer Experience Accomplishments Report, detailing 71 major initiatives to improve customer service for veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. Improving customer service as a top priority at VA was established in 2018 and it challenged the department to rethink VA customer interactions, and it designated the Veterans Experience Office as the quote-unquote, "voice of the veteran." Veterans have validated VA's efforts with trust, in VA healthcare reaching an all-time high in April with trust up 16 points since January of 2016. These points are based on over 5.7 million real-time responses from 66 customer feedback surveys. Some recent improvements listed in the report include connecting with transitioning veterans during the first year of their separation via *Solid Start*, honoring nearly 4 million veterans interred at VA National Cemeteries with a digital memorial space, improving access to board of veterans appeals with virtual hearings, connecting veterans to resources more than 238 million times via VA's weekly email, Vet Resources and answering close to 3 million customer calls via 1-800-MYVA-411 and the White House at VA hotline, which off-which both offer general assistance agents to the veteran immediately. For more information on the Veterans Experience Office, go to [va.gov/ve/](https://www.va.gov/ve/) [Link: <https://www.va.gov/ve/>]. And we'll also put the report in this podcast episode's, blog on [blogs.va.gov](https://www.blogs.va.gov) [Link: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/>].

Okay. Next one says the US Department of Veterans Affairs recently announced it is working with the Centers for Disease Control and prevention, CDC, and other federal partners to develop a comprehensive COVID-19 vaccine plan to ensure VA safely and equitably distributes vaccines once authorized. The plan will be a phased approach based on scientific and historical evidence, lessons learned from past pandemic vaccine plans, and input from scientific experts, both within and outside VA. COVID-19 vaccine implementation will include an initial limited supply phase followed by a general implementation phase when large supplies of the vaccine will be available to veterans who want to receive one. VA experts in ethics, health, equity, infectious disease, logistics, pandemic planning, pharmacy, and public health, as well as those in the areas of change management, clinicians from various disciplines, data, education, IT, safety and training along with government partners were sought for input to help develop the plan. VA also conducted veteran listening sessions for valuable feedback in the planning process. To learn the latest information on COVID-19 vaccines, you can visit the CDC COVID-19 vaccine site at [cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines) [Link]. You can also go to [blogs.va.gov](https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/) [Link: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/>] as there is a great blog on there titled, "When COVID-19 Vaccine Comes, VA Will Be Ready," which kind of lays out the news release out in more of a, of layman terms.

All right. And the last one says for media release, the US Department of Veterans Affairs announced recently that VA's chief research and development officer, Dr. Rachel Ramoni, has been selected as the first recipient of the "Above and Beyond" award from the Women and Science Forum of the Prostate Cancer Foundation. Dr. Ramoni received the award for advancing biomedical research and clinical trials for veterans with prostate cancer and contributing to the fight against COVID-19. Under at Ramoni's stewardship, the VA Office of Research and Development has implemented policies that have streamlined research efforts, especially for multi-site clinical trials. In some cases, this has reduced the startup time for clinical trials from several months to a matter of weeks. In addition to advancing precision oncology research, Dr. Ramoni promotes diversity within VA's research enterprise and has been instrumental in mentoring women at researchers within VA. For more information on what the good doctor received the award for and how it impacts you, go to research.va.gov [Link]. Or, tell you what, just go to va.gov [Link], and just type her name in Ramoni, R A M O N I. There are all kinds of stuff from clinical trials to prostate cancer, to COVID-19, that she has touched, everything that is come through VA research and development and in typing in her name

and doing the research, you can learn a lot about what VA is currently researching in general. Little tidbit for you.

All right, so this week's interview is an Air Force veteran. For much of his military career. He was a video of flight commander for the First Combat Camera Squadron. His post-military career included digital marketing for Paramount Pictures. Where he was the man behind Optimus Prime's official social media, making fun of Megatron, how cool was that? Did the same for Technicolor. Then, he helped start up a successful high-end headphone company out of a garage and eventually became the President and Chief Marketing Officer for the military-culture media company, *We are the Mighty*. He is air force veteran, Mark Harper. Enjoy.

[00:12:08] Music

[00:12:13] OPENING MONOLOGUE:

(TI): Let me start recording just so we can get some of these great things that you're saying about Borne the Battle on record.

Mark Harper (MH): Sure, absolutely.

(TI): It's a small crew, but we do what we can.

(MH): Absolutely we were. We're big fans. I personally am a big fan of the VA to begin with. It's the only one I have. So, I cherish and love it as much as possible.

(TI): Yeah.

(MH): So anyway, to like help broaden the reach of these stories you're doing is absolutely in line with with our charter.

(TI): Yeah, we really appreciate the fact that you syndicate a lot of information, because at the end of the day, we just care about the information getting out.

(MH): Right.

(TI): Mark it's been over a year, man. Last time I saw you was at the 2019 Military Influencer Conference, right?

(MH): Yeah, that's right.

(TI): And you guys were having a viewing for the movie, The Last Full Measure.

(MH): Yes.

(TI): Gotta tell you my personal story on that. I didn't know what that movie was at the time that you guys were helping promote that. And I thought it was like a student film at the conference or something. And I was like, okay, yeah, I'll probably skip that. And then Augie came over wherever I was. And he was like, Hey, you guys watch this film? It's pretty, you know, they're like, fine, whatever. What? And we walked in towards the end, I guess what you would call the culminating scene and we were like, Oh, my God, this is Samuel Jackson this.

(MH): You know, we were like, what did we missed.

(TI): That movie, if you came in at the end of it, that is a real tearjerker, the very end of it. It makes me so proud to be in the Air Force, actually, the way they shot that final sequence. So, you came in at the right time, I think.

(MH): Yeah.

(TI): You know, we were like, what we missed.

(MH): That movie, if you came in at the end of it, that is a real tearjerker, the very end of it. It makes me so proud to be in the Air Force, actually, the way they shot that final sequence. So, you came in at the right time, I think.

(TI): Oh, yeah, absolutely. I came in there. And I saw that scene. And I was like, Oh, my God, I got to see the rest of the film. So, we went on to another viewing at the Air Force conference later on, some weeks down the line. But no, that was kind of my introduction to the We Are the Mighty staff other than Blake, who you and I both know.

(MH): Right.

(TI): Real quick. Blake was my TA up at Syracuse. And that's how I knew Blake Stillwell.

(MH): Blake and I served together.

(TI): Over at First Combat Camera.

(MH): Yeah.

(TI): Okay. What was he? You were the wing commander? You were the commander there, the flight commander there. What was he just one of your troops?

(MH): I wouldn't say he was just one of my troops. I would say he was like, one of the most amazing troops that we had there. I was there at a very, I think special timeframe where some really incredible people came out of. So, like, Blake was there. He was the youngest. He was the youngest videographer we ever had. He was also the one that was trying, I think, you know, the hardest to prove himself. And he was very gifted. We did a lot of great projects together. You have your like, Stacy Pearsalls of the world, who have gone on to do incredible things in the military community. JT Lock, highly celebrated photographer. I mean, I was there when all the rock stars were there. It's pretty great.

(TI): Yes. And, I do want to get into that. I do. I definitely want to get into that. But first, I want to go back a little bit further. I want to go back to the first time, and just the first question that we ask everyone on Borne the Battle, the first time that you knew that the military was the next step. When and where was that for you?

(MH): Gosh, I am embarrassed to admit this out loud. But I went into the military kicking and screaming. So, I was getting ready for college. My parents had just divorced. My father was an Army Green Beret Airborne Ranger. He was you know, the cream of the crop Special Forces.

(TI): Yeah.

(MH): And so much to the fact that growing up, we used to listen to Army Ranger cadences on cassette tape, as we would drive around town.

(TI): He was moto, he was moto.

(MH): So, moto. A very, it was very impressive to grow up in that kind of environment. But also, it didn't feel like it was for me at all.

(TI): Probably a little intimidating to have someone so moto. And then,

(MH):

Yeah. So, it's time to like apply for college, etc. And again, they had just separated, my father sits me down and his version of motivating me into college was, it's time for you become a man, you need to cut your hair, you look absurd. And you need to fill out all these ROTC scholarships. So, you can go to school, because we're not going to pay for this. Like, okay. My mother had a little bit more of a gentler approach, encouraging me to consider an ROTC scholarship to pay for school because we had, you know, I have a brother and a sister. And by offsetting that cost, we were giving them, you know, a better leg up, more opportunities. So, I applied for all of them, ended up getting an Air Force scholarship. And they dictated where I went to school, which was RPI in upstate New York, in Troy. And it's actually where I wanted to go to school. But we're getting a letter in the mail saying, here's the school you're going to, here is your major. And me being unfamiliar with what that was at the time it was called computer systems engineering, as to this date, I still don't know what that is.

(TI):

They gave that to you like they gave you this is what you're going to major? Interesting.

(MH):

Yeah, it doesn't always go like that. But so, I mean, the Air Force had a very specific need for communications officers at the time. And that was exactly what the track that they wanted me to go on. So, if I was going to take the money, here's the school I was going to go to, and here's the degree I was going to have. And that was a bit intimidating, if I'm being honest, I showed up to ROTC. And it's a bunch of military stuff that I was absolutely not interested in. And I kind of pulled away from that. And what was fascinating about this whole thing is, I slowly realized as the years were going by that, oh my god, I'm about to actually be in the military, I better change my attitude about all this. And I had been, I've been, but you know, I talked about having a technical degree. I had moved from that computer systems engineering over to computer science. And I had a dual major in a budding program there. That was essentially digital media, was animation, and it was film production. And so, the Air Force didn't care if I had a dual major. And there's a reason why I'm outlining this. I started making videos, non-stop, you know, to fill my requirements at school, but I just I loved it. I loved creating content. And I started doing it for detachment in 550, which was the ROTC detachment over the Air Force, I made a recruiting video, I made a whole bunch of morale videos, which is just kind of code for just making fun of other people that you're in the cadet corps with. And a staff sergeant who was assigned there, pulled me aside and he said, it was actually the day that I got commissioned,

he pulled me aside and he's like, Lt. I've been watching you, essentially, drag your feet alongside your fellow cadets here. But I have to tell you, where you really shine, is this telling the stories and highlighting what we're doing in the military. And you will find that in the military, you just have the look, it's there, I promise you. And he was right. Right. And you found this as well, at combat camera. Ultimately, I was able to find it in there. So anyway, I got into the Air Force.

(TI): What year was this?

(MH): This was 2001. This was eight months before 911.

(TI): Oh, wow.

(MH): So, I go in, and they roll out the red carpet for you, when you get to the Air Force. And by that, I mean it's like it's very accommodating. There's a very defined set of things you have to go do, and checklists. And I report into the squadron. And I was like, you know what,

(TI): That's pretty different than boot camp.

(MH): And so, I did our version of that, I did that in between my sophomore and junior year. So yes, I did get to live that experience. And that's actually when I started to be like, okay, I like this a lot more than I thought I would. And then my first job in the Air Force, I worked for a deployed communications Squadron. And I really was starting to dig it. They sent me away to communications training. I came back, I'm literally about to go into, you know, my first day of work as like a bonafide communications officer. And the towers come down. And the world changed. And it went from, Oh, wow, I'm in the military. This is actually kind of cool to, Oh, wow, I am in the military, we are about to go to war. And what's crazy about my first assignment is that we were with the pilots, the first people out the door. And deployed communications officer basically goes with a small team to set up the communications to then build a base, you'd be dropped in the middle of nowhere to like start landing planes and start creating infrastructure that would be bases. So, September 12, half my Squadron deployed, they're out the door, they went over to Qatar. And they would then forward deployed from there to start setting up the infrastructure that would be the beginning of you know OAF (Operation Allied Forces), OEF (Operation Enduring Freedom), etc.

(TI): So where was the starting point, pretty much from Qatar to Kuwait, from Kuwait to

(MH): Yeah, yeah.

(TI): Wow.

(MH): And, you know, I didn't even know half the places that they were kind of staging and going because it was all very much classified at the time.

(TI): Yeah. So, you weren't in combat camera then. You were in comms, setting up grid towers and satellites and stuff like that

(MH): That's what you would think. What's amazing started my journey over to combat camera is, you know, I'm listening to those words of that incredible Sergeant who pulled me aside. And I start to do things where I'm trying to apply this like creativity. And so half the squadrons gone, and a general came in to come see the rest of the deployed force. And there was a presentation being given. And I remember going up to my boss saying, Hey, can I put like, a little animation the beginning of this presentation? And he was like, No, no, absolutely not. I don't like well, this is PowerPoint. This is also this is also 2001 PowerPoint. So, I was like, you know, just something like cool to like welcome the general. And he said, I could tell that he was like, if I just let him do this, I can just delete it, and he'll go away. And so, I did. And this is kind of crazy to say, but I had to program in PowerPoint, an animation that I built in Flash, brought in, and when I say program, I had to like I had to tell the program how to like start and stop on the frame. And we're looping anime, etc. and I and I animated an eagle flying onto the screen, grabbing a lightning bolt, globe forming around him in a shield building with like an eagle scream and a lightning flash, it probably sounds way more impressive than it is. I can send you a link to it.

(TI): It's funny how you're talking about programming it. But nowadays, it's something that you can create in After Effects in like, I don't know half a day.

(MH): Oh, yeah, whatever. Oh, yeah. Yeah. And so, I built this. And he didn't even see it, when I gave it back to him because you had to, like deliberately click through when you were in live mode. So, he's like, alright you didn't really do anything. I just see a blue screen. Great. We'll just go right on. So, hits play. This animation happens in front of 300 people in this auditorium. And the general says, who did that? And the whole room like turns around looking for who like, who did do that. But I'm in the very back, I raise my hand and he

says, come see me after this. So, the whole presentation goes. I go and see this general after the fact.

(TI): Now, when you said that what was in your mind?

(MH): I was like, Oh, this is awesome. I don't know what's going to happen. But this has got to be cool. My boss was now terrified. And my boss's boss was like, I have to chaperone this, like what is happening? What is going on with this Lieutenant?

(TI): You're like, this is cool. They're like, oh no, son, you have no idea. This might not be cool.

(MH): Yeah, exactly. And you know, what's funny is like many, many years later, this general would like would see me and call me out in the middle of a giant auditorium again, it was so great. So, I show up. And he's like, who are you? And I'm like, Lieutenant Mark Harper, just got here part of the Air Mobility Operations Squadron. He's like, I don't think you should be doing that. I think you should be doing what you just did. You should be in the training department here and work on videos. And the colonel was like, yes, that's exactly what we were thinking, let's send him there. So, I ended up getting a dual role where I would go out and deploy and run small teams for exercises predominantly. And then I also worked on training videos. But the training videos never actually happened. What did happen is a lot of like morale videos. And these morale videos would get played in front of like, dining outs, dining ins and like change of command ceremony. So, I would basically be asked to put together a video making fun of whatever was happening as like the morale component of it. And I kind of became like, infamous to some degree because you didn't want to end up on you know, on my radar to get made fun of in one of these like Harper productions, and then finally like the same Colonel was like, you really should be over at combat camera. And I'm like, what's a combat camera? That sounds exactly what I should be doing.

(TI): What's a combat camera?

(MH): Yeah. And so, I did get sent over in 2004. I showed up to combat camera. Blake had like shown up just weeks before that, very quiet individual. But I had already started like making waves as being like, known as like a pretty solid editor for a couple weeks into the job. And I was the only officer at combat camera in like the longest time, since they actually like had a combat camera officer function. Years before that they killed and just said, you know what, this is a position that's supposed to be just managed.

(TI): Administrative and

(MH): Exactly.

(TI): So, when you were actually producing stuff,

(MH): I was producing stuff. And we all were as officers, but never providing any creative input. And I remember on like, week three there, I had a couple of troops come in, and some of them had like known that I had a background in video. And some of them knew that I actually had like, made projects myself. And so, there was a little bit of street cred, but not a lot of street cred coming from the enlisted core for an officer, that's like new coming in who hasn't done anything. And so, this one guy comes in, he's a master sergeant, you could tell like he was trying to get his troops out of work that day. And so, he comes in, and I can see that it was behind him. And they're like, sir, the avid is down, we can't, we can't connect some of the drives. So, we're not going to be able to edit today. And I was like, oh, that happens to be my specialty. I can reconnect those about two seconds. Let me add it. And then I could see all of their eyes like, drop and then the master sergeant was like, Oh, that's right. You're the one that, okay, never mind, we'll get back to work. I'm like, no, no, no, I hear you loud and clear. And if this were anyone else, you would have most likely gotten away with leaving early. So why don't I not buck the trend on this today? I'm not here to make waves to begin with anyway. But please do consider me as someone that you can't snowball in the future. And he was like, roger that sir. I had the best time of my life to this day, still working, being deployed. And being around such creative individuals. It was such an amazing like real introduction to the rest of the military working in like purple environments. Working with the army and the Navy and the Marine Corps.

(TI): Yes.

(MH): And then the Air Force at large and being deployed twice. And actually having a global mission as part of like combat camera, the imagery we were taking, would show up like the next day on like CNN and Fox, it was kind of insane to see imagery get cleared through your hands and then end up on like a national venue.

(TI): And this was a time when, you know, the communication freeway isn't what it is today, you know,

(MH):

Right.

(TI):

To get image from a cave in Afghanistan, to CNN, or it was a little bit of a different type of process than what it is now. Especially video footage.

(MH):

It was crazy, right? I mean, we didn't have internet in 2005 in Iraq, that wasn't a thing. We barely had telephones, right. So, we were sending out photographers, videographers and then maintenance crews that were setting up these like satellite terminals to feed back into Baghdad, go through our imagery management team. And then for us to send it back to Atlanta, to DVIDS in DC as well. And you're right, and that was a Herculean task. And the biggest job that we had to do was the 2005, the first official elections that that Iraq had. Our job was to do one of two things. It was either to prove to the world that democracy was prevailing and to go out and vote. And here were all the now unclassified voting locations that were hidden really up until like the hours before, for security reasons. Or the job was to tell the Iraqis do not go and vote you're going to get blown up. All eyes were on combat camera that day across the world. Just many people didn't know it. When everyone woke up December 15, 2005, to see all those purple fingers across all the news organizations. It's because of the hard-working men and women of combat camera, and the entire army system that was allowing us access to the polling sites, and then were facilitating getting content all the way through that satellite sequence so

(TI):

Now so you say the army infrastructure was a joint combat camera at that time? Or was it pretty much first combat camera that was you were a part of?

(MH):

It was 76 people across Army, Navy, Air Force, with Air Force having the second largest footprint. But, Air Force having the lion's share of the officers that would fill the billet to run it. So almost every single combat camera OIC was filled by an Air Force officer. And then there would be an Army Lieutenant that was second in command. And that was very helpful, because dealing with Army soldiers while deployed is not an easy task for an Air Force Captain, that's for sure.

(TI):

And especially from an Air Force Captain from the famed first combat camera out in South Carolina. I say famed because you guys usually took all the military videographer awards, mil vids as we call them. Which are basically, for those that are listening, they're basically the Emmys or the Oscars of the DOD combat and Public Affairs community. It's an inner service competition and all that. I got to say it was after your time, but you know, I watched first combat

camera take the lion's share of those awards except for 2009 2010. When I snagged the best video editing category for two years straight,

(MH): Whoa

(TI): You know, and lately, there's been some Marines putting in work out there. I don't know if you saw any of Matthew Callaghan's stuff. He just got out, but for the most part, he took the photographer and videographer in the same year.

(MH): That is so hard to do and incredible.

(TI): Yeah. But for the most part, Air Force's first combat camera took most of the awards of those shows. Why do you think that was? Was it being in placed in purple environments where they can get that imagery? Was it the training? What do you think? Was it just the talent that you guys had at the time?

(MH): There's so many things that came together. So, one, the real embarrassing part of all of it is we had the most money, like hands down. Yeah, Air Force coming here had the most resourcing. So many people got to go to Syracuse. So many people had like the latest editing equipment, the latest camera. And because of that environment, we kind of grew some, you know, very talented, it also came with like this air of royalty to some degree, right? Because we were being asked for by name, to show up and document things, and see, you know, some generals would identify correctly that we could help make their exercise look sexy, and help them get money for it next year by giving them this like incredible sizzle reel of what Cobra Gold was in 2005. So, we started to have like a pretty solid calling card. And with that came either a lot of support or a lot of animosity. But either way, we weren't fishing for work ever. So, everything was inbound, and based on task orders, and based off of whatever the existing needs were. I mean, you most likely experienced this. Combat camera is a very misunderstood creature inside. And so often back in the day, we were separate from public affairs. And there was a definitive church and state difference between the two.

(TI): Yeah. Absolutely.

(MH): Now it falls under public affairs. And I think its kind of become more of a whitewash term for, you know, basically a combat photojournalists to some degree. You know, we were very proud of the fact that we were not spinning any stories. That was for psychological operations to do, that was for public

affairs to do. We were shooting the things that would end up on the History Channel someday. That was essentially what we were attempting to do.

(TI): Yes, it was very delineated. None of the imagery that we caught, was influenced by anything other than what was right in front of us.

(MH): Right.

(TI): You're right, there is a lot of pride in that. We were more historical documentation. We let public affairs do public affairs does, and psyops, do what psyops does. But no, absolutely. Marine Corps calls it STRATCOM now. Is it pretty integrated together now with the Air Force?

(MH): So, it all completely falls underneath public affairs. And I would probably argue that the mission is, you know, as mutated as such. But like the Navy, the Navy has dropped combat camera altogether at this point. So, I would imagine that we're a dying breed in its purest form. But hopefully the tenants of the quality that we were bringing to that equation, plus the advances in technology, etc, are allowing public affairs to kind of maintain that same level of quality of imagery gathering and storytelling.

(TI): Do you think it's because of the way that the gear has pretty much, it's not as expensive to get the gear anymore as it used to be?

(MH): Yeah, so like, in 2005 getting a task order to go into, not that we ever did this, but going to a mosque and document whether or not there was a weapons cache in there. It can now be done by a soldier with a GoPro.

(TI): Yeah.

(MH): You know, being inserted in very precarious places and having to bump someone off of, you know, a stack of breaching a house is now all done much more safely by the train professionals who are wearing GoPros and chess harnesses, etc. My entire job was trying to teach someone several ranks above me who had no time in the day to hear an Air Force guy asked to pull one of their train warriors out of combat to insert a photographer. I would get laughed out of the room before I even began to start, and then they would get a call from the Pentagon. Or, I would be able to actually use my salesmanship to essentially explain to them why this was a good thing for the mission and good thing for the war effort as a whole. And ultimately, we always did get into the mission, but it was an uphill battle every single time, and it took a lot

of Blackhawk trips from me flying to extremely remote places in Iraq to meet with someone, you know, meet with a colonel to get participation, authorization and, you know, that was my full time job being a sales guy.

(TI): Yeah, for me at my level, it was always starting out with the capabilities brief. And then if that didn't go, then I would look for a target of opportunity. Because I didn't, it was me in a lieutenant that was public affairs. I was combat camera, and I still had to show that we did have a separate mission. And I remember in Romania, our CO was mad that we were, when Russia invaded Ukraine, we were the closest unit to Crimea, and our CO was angry that we were the third option to evacuate Kiev. And we were the Black Sea rotational force, you know, technically, we were there to, you know, train with other countries and things like that. But we also had a capability where we could actually do that. And he didn't know how to communicate that up to the combatant commander. And I was like, see, that was my target of opportunity was just going, sir, I know you have to brief Congress when you get back. Let me make you a product. Let me make you a video. Let me make you a documentary that explains the whole special purpose, MAGTF purpose, the real purpose for being out here. And from there, I was able to sell them. Next thing you know, I was all over Europe, you know? So, it takes, you right? It takes a little bit of salesmanship to really get that mission across, because not many people knew what exactly what we did.

(MH): Yeah, absolutely. And it to the outside world that it can seem like it's a waste of resourcing, if not understood correctly. People now, when I talk about being in combat camera, they look at me with a puzzled look, and say, I have an iPhone, can I just do that job now instead? And I'm like, actually, to agree. Yes. But we did serve a very important purpose and still do.

(TI): Yes. So, while you were in, Mark, gave me either at your best friend, or your greatest mentor.

(MH): So greatest mentor, I would say is a guy by the name of Jim Fabio. He's a colonel now still in the Air Force reserves.

(TI): It's a great name.

(MH): It is. Yeah, it is. Actually, Jim has two Emmys. His real-world job is a videographer and director. And he actually helps teach courses with Blake, Juan Femath and some of the other like combat camera crew that have now created that DC shoot off that happens once a year. But I remember Jim was

the first combat camera lay adjutant to commander. So, he would come in to do his kind of reserved two weeks. You know, weekend a month, two weeks a year with combat camera, as the alternate commander. And I remember, we were creating, or I was creating an animation that was going to be the beginning of this exercise we were doing. And it was a really dumb goofy animation about why we all had to get in the back of C130, get flown to the middle of this exercise. And I was animating in Flash, I was making fun of people in the squadron doing this, like Terrance and Phillip style animation explaining like, these terrorists had come, and they were launching missiles at this field. We had to go and survey what was happening and set up a camp, etc.

(TI): You seem like a fun Lt. I'm just going to say, I never had a Lt. like that.

(MH): I like to think so. For the most part, I think it was, I did learn a lot about leadership, etc, over that timeframe. But Jim was sitting next to me and he says, hey, you're really good at this. I look at him, like, I'm really good at making really dumb cartoons. I think you're right as well. And he said, No, like, you're you could get paid to do this. You should get paid to do things like this. I'm like, I do get paid to do things like this. I'm on the clock right now. And he said, you know, there's not a lot of people, and you know, especially from the officer side, who can actually create, and you're a creator and not an imitator. I don't know why that stuck with me. But it was part of the calculus for why I would eventually leave the military, and Jim and I stay in touch now. We actually have hired him to do work at We Are the Mighty, on occasion to and he's done fabulous things for us.

(TI): Now you got out in 2007. Right.

(MH): Correct.

(TI): Was that right before the Great Recession? Or was that during

(MH): That would be, I think like moments before. But it was during that timeframe where I think David Tenenbaum had mentioned it to you there, we're doing a reduction in forces and voluntary separation pay came out. So, the first time ever the Air Force was paying very specific career fields and time and grade to take a multiplier of their time in service as a severance pay and leave. Oh, and I'm not kidding you the night before. I was juggling some things. You as an officer, you can't stay in any particular job for no more than three to five years at this point. And I had just hit four and gotten my next assignment to go back

and become a traditional communications officer again. Maybe go run a land shop somewhere and, help security for a base. And that sounded like a death sentence for me. And I, had just come back from my second deployment, and was really starting to think like, is there a chance I could just go to Los Angeles and see what happens out there. I need a sign; someone give me a sign of what to do. And an email hit my inbox, and it said, volunteer separation pay for communications officers between four and eight years. I basically said, Mark Harper, we got a deal for you. And I showed up to work the next morning, and the commander pulled all of us in and said, I know you all got an email last night, I'm here to tell you that none of you need to take that. And I shoot my hand up and I go, ma'am, I have already filled out the application. I just need you to sign it. And she shot me this look of like, just absolute disdain. And she pulled me aside and she said, you know what? You don't see this right now. But I see it very clear, the Air Force is going to lose all of its best, because they're getting paid to leave right now. And we're going to be kind of in a situation and like 10 years, where we're missing some real, and I'm like, this sounds like a you problem, ma'am. And not to be problem about?

(TI): She's looking at the 10,000-foot view. And she's like, don't ruin this for me. And you're like, Nope, sorry. Already done.

(MH): Oh, crazy. Yeah, so crazy. And but as,

(TI): I mean, that your next assignment, though, it doesn't sound, I mean, from a creative mind. You're right. It sounds like a death sentence.

(MH): Yeah, it was. So, the best thing the Air Force ever did, for me, was allowing me to serve in combat camera. It's also the worst thing the Air Force did for itself, because I had, you know, been to the top, as it were.

(TI): Yeah. But I mean, I think they got the most out of you for what your skill set was. And what your passion was.

(MH): Absolutely

(TI): You know, and there's nothing wrong with that. And I think a lot of people, you know, maybe sometimes they stick in a little bit too long. Or, you know, I but, I think everyone kind of knows they get this feeling of, you know what, now's the time.

(MH): Absolutely.

(TI): Now's the time. And you have to listen to that, you know, and no matter what, whether you do four years, or you do 30 years, eventually you do have to put up the uniform. And you got to decide what's the best way to transition from what I'm doing right now. And it sounds like you.

(MH): Right.

(TI): This helped you with that.

(MH): It did, but it was also absolutely terrifying thing to do, to just kind of blindly move to Los Angeles. One of the people I deployed with was actually a reservist combat camera officer as well. And I remember him coming into work one day, and he was like, you really like this? And I'm like, Yeah, what do you mean? Yeah, we're at combat camera. I love this. This is great. I love every second of this.

(TI): Yeah.

(MH): And he said, yeah, this is more of just like a job for me. But you should move to Los Angeles. And I basically looked at him, and I'm like, what's a little girl like me gonna do in a big city like that? And he said, well, as fate would have it, I have an extra bedroom that you could rent. And that would be a great staging opportunity for you. And I have a couple of connections for you. So, you could like kind of hit the ground running. And that combined with that email about voluntary separation pay kind of locked in and started my journey to Los Angeles as a whole.

(TI): So, you went over there a little bit blind?

(MH): I did. I doesn't, you know -

(TI): And that scares a lot of people. It doesn't scare me. I'll be honest. I mean, maybe it's because we come from the same kind of creative background. But I totally moved to Seattle, and before I got the email from NASCAR. I was totally gonna buy a van. And I was going to outfit it as an editing station. Just go to Vancouver, and just see what happens. That was my first post-military plan before I started applying to jobs and actually one actually came in.

(MH): Oh, that's cool. Amazing.

(TI): Oh, no, your plan of going blindly to LA. I feel you; I feel you.

(MH): Yeah. A lot of things happened during that timeframe, though. Before the We Are the Mighty

(TI): Yeah

(MH): Opportunity. Yeah, you started in kind of marketing to business development. Like for some big names, Paramount Pictures, doing digital marketing campaigns for like the Transformers, GI Joe, and you know, the Star Trek reboot. How did you transition into that line of work after service? It's super hard to actually kind of connect the dots in that manner. But as you can imagine everyone was very interested in learning about what combat camera was. And, so anytime I would like reach out to somebody, like cold call, I'd say Hi, I just separate from Air Force, I did something called combat camera. I would usually send over a couple of like combat camera photos from like the previous week. And no one had seen the war detailed like this, because it didn't always get into the news that way.

(TI): Sure.

(MH): And so there's like these beautiful shots of operations or wartime experiences. And that was a great door opener. And I was able to kind of to use this initial like network that I got from that individual; Hamilton Underwood was his name. And some initial introductions, I actually got through combat camera. Actually, the fourth combat camera knew that I was coming out, and I'd served with some of them. And ended up on the first day in Los Angeles, I ended up getting a job interview at Fox to essentially go do like the behind the scenes stuff that would end up back in the day on DVDs.

(TI): Sure, yeah

(MH): And I went in and this just kind of funnels into the overarching Hollywood story. But I showed up, I went to this interview, they were like blown away by this experience. And they were like, you know, we could absolutely see sending you to the set of 24, dealing with a drunk Kiefer Sutherland you've dealt with I'm sure scarier people in your timeframe. This is amazing for me. I'm like, this sounds amazing. Yeah, absolutely. I would love to do this. Here's the crazy thing that happened. The very next day, the writer strike hit. And when the writer strike hit in 2007, the entire Hollywood machine came screeching to a halt. And not only did that job disappear the next day, that

entire department got absorbed, restructured, and like there was without TV resuming and production, there was nothing to go and produce. And it hobbled, like so many people's livelihoods. And so, I was now joining Hollywood at the most inopportune time ever, as it was essentially coming to a halt.

(TI): Yeah.

(MH): And really having to fall back on Okay, well, technically, I was, you know, a version of a producer. Maybe there's something on the business side of the equation that I can jump into. I don't have scripts in my disposal. I've never had the opportunity to work in development. And I ended up taking, it's not really in my, you know, my LinkedIn past, but I ended up taking an internship at a production company. For Gary Ross, the guy that made like Seabiscuit, and Hunger Games, and I was sitting there making photocopies of books and scripts, fetching coffee, picking up pizza, driving around the lot of Universal where we were located. And seeing the entertainment industry from the belly of the beast, and in development, where it's all like, it's a grind of reading scripts and setting the things you like up and trying to make those things turn into TV shows and movies. And I remember when they found out that I had this military background, people were coming up to apologize to me for asking me to like photocopy a book. And I'm like, please do not, I will be the best damn photocopier you've ever seen. Like I'm hungry for this. And I get you have to pay your dues and learn the business from the inside out. So I'm ready to learn real quick.

(TI): How important was that humility?

(MH): So just having come from the military, we have to like pay your dues. I never thought I could skip really any steps going in. I thought that I at least had an interesting enough story to gain an audience to pitch myself to see what I could do. But I never really had like a chip on my shoulder. Even to the point of like, sometimes I would hide that military background. Because it wasn't serving me a purpose in some of my early Hollywood days.

(TI): Yeah.

(MH): So, it was a very challenging time. So, I think people were still just very confused about the war in general at that time. And the anger from being at war, transitioned to, will we support the troops. It's not their decision to start wars, it's their decision to help defend the country after the fact. And so,

(TI): Yeah

(MH): That movement kind of came around a few years later, but it was a hard thing to navigate in the very beginning.

(TI): Sure. Sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt you. You were talking about how you got from that, first gig and then getting into Paramount.

(MH): So, I ended up getting a great meeting to go meet with the head of the interactive marketing department. And that was a very budding part of the marketing machine for Hollywood as it were. This was when MySpace was still a big thing and Facebook pages were just starting. So, I ended up going to an interview. I'll never forget how this went down. I was like basically asked to meet the three creative directors there. And one of the creative directors, I walked into his office, it was the most fantastic. Like comic filled movie paraphernalia office you've ever seen with replicas of like Optimus Prime that were like three feet high in the room, and I was just like, this is the coolest office I've ever seen. He doesn't even look up. He doesn't even look up. He's wearing a hoodie and it's drawing over his eyes. His room isn't complete, like pitch dark, the shades are drawn. He says, Yeah, it's a lot cooler than that suit you're wearing. Suit. Like, I feel like I'm an entourage being like accosted right now. And so, I sit down on the chair in front of him because he's been asked to meet with me at this point by his boss. And he kind of, he lightens up a little bit, and he's like, I'm messing with you. I really have an appreciation for the military. And let me tell you all the cool things like I would do with the military, and the people that like, I've been kind of collecting in terms of just my own personal like outreach and sponsorship. And this guy's name is Mickey Capoferri, incredible human being. He ended up hiring me out of that interview, because he learned about like, all the animation stuff I did. He's like, you could be like a real hands-on guy to help me work with the agencies to like, fix things that take them too long and cost too much money. He's like your first thing you're doing. Yeah, you were going to build and manage the Optimus Prime MySpace page. Like Wait, I'm Optimus Prime now and he's like your Optimus Prime now. And some of your best friends are Shia LeBeouf, and Megan Fox and Bumblebee. And it was weird to be Optimus Prime for that timeframe. But we were working on these digital marketing campaigns. And again, social media was so budding at the time that was crazy to watch this unfold in real time.

(TI): So, this was a MySpace page like of Optimus Prime, and you had to act like you were Optimus Prime.

(MH): Yes, I had 500,000 followers. And I basically had to like post updates to make fun of Megatron and you know, basically talk about how great Autobots are.

(TI): Oh, that's great.

(MH): It was really when Facebook was on its way out. And sorry, it was when MySpace was on its way out. And as Facebook was just starting to gain traction, but still had no ability to, you couldn't like buy likes at the time. So, everything was organic, same thing for MySpace. But it was under such a microscope because studios and Paramount was leaning far forward into it. We're starting to embrace digital as an alternative means to out of home, you know, billboards or anything like broadcast commercial lies. So we were like trailblazing and trying to make a name for the micro content. We were putting as kind of Easter eggs for the diehards out there for they were very interested in the Transformer universe, etc.

(TI): And let them spread the word. Very good.

(MH): Exactly.

(TI): Now you did the same line of stuff for Technicolor for the animation and gaming department. How did that differ from Paramount? How did you make that transition over there?

(MH): So apparently, like working at a studio is a fascinating and terrifying experience. And it's very thankless, although it's very cool.

(TI): Yeah.

(MH): And I was on a contract. And this was when the recession was hitting. So, I was on a year contract, I was set against the budgets of a handful of films. I was being called on paper, a military advisor. But these movies were all shot in the can and final steps of post-production. It was more of like, where we can take those funds, and then divert them to what you're really doing, which is digital marketing.

(TI): Gotcha.

(MH):

And so, it ended up being that the recession was hitting people were getting let go in mass. I was protected because I was already set against budgets of films that was already spent. But when that timeframe came up, I was offered a job to stay. I was a part time person there at Paramount. And that was the same timeframe that I was at UCLA Anderson doing the Masters of Business Administration program. And they offered me a job, and I just looked at the job offer, and I was like I can't do this. This sets me back so many years. I looked at the, you know, who my boss was going to be? And I said, "would you take this if you were me?" And, she did her best job of like dancing around and then ultimately she's like, "No, you should not take this job." And I'm like, "okay, great. We're agreed I'll go back to being unemployed." Go back to school and see what my next step is. But Technicolor came shockingly kind of fast after that through a connection. And again, something you're not taught in the military, at least back in the days, there was no reason to do networking, there was no reason to like, try to build your own brand and meet people and learn more about what others are doing and how you can help them and connecting the dots. So, I just kind of had to do that out of necessity. And every interviewer, every meeting I got, I would just ask for three other people I could bug. And because I was a veteran, and I had a cool story, usually the individual was happy to point me in the direction to somebody else. And that would start that train. So, I ended up getting an interview with the person who was basically the Global Marketing Officer for Technicolor. Technicolor, when I joined was a 22,000-person company spread across the globe. And we really only know in the US as the post-production company that helped create color film.

(TI):

Yeah

(MH):

Wizard of Oz being the very first one. But outside of the US, Technicolor is the number one set top box provider and one of and a patent holder of about 40,000 patents at the time. So, it was a real money making machine outside that happened to also have this video production component across the entertainment spectrum. And so, I got a chance to work for him, name is Ahmad Ori. And because he was in charge of all of Technicolor, I got to see the seven different divisions of the company and interact. And animation and gaming was in the very beginning of its stages. And I gravitated to it and ultimately, kind of,

(TI):

Naturally because you're, you know, doing flash and whatnot.

(MH): Right. And I kind of moved my way into that department. And the first thing I said is like, you know, I'm from the marketing team, I'm like, we don't need marketing, we need people making stuff. And I'm like, well, as a matter of fact, I think one of the problems you guys have is like recruiting, recruiting other animators in places like Bangalore, India. Let me go there, I will make your recruiting video. And I think this is another one of those things where my boss was like, if I say yes, we go away, and I'm like, Yes. And so, I did, I went away, I went away to Bangalore, India made them a very cool recruiting piece that they used to show like, what's the environment? What's it like to be an animator at these kind of offshore locations? And it's actually a very, very cool thing that we were a part of at that time.

(TI): Interesting. That's super interesting. Now, I mean, you worked at Paramount. And there's a lot of people that you talk about that offered that you were given. There's a lot of people that would have taken that offer. Working at Technicolor, you know, these are two very large companies. And a lot of people may think, man, this guy made it. I get this question a lot, too. You know, people talk to me, they're like, you know, you were a senior postproduction editor for NASCAR productions. You're working on Fox Sports One. This, that, the other thing - why leave? Why would you? You know, a lot of people would have taken that offer from Paramount, is what I'm trying to get at, you know, just -

(MH): Oh, yes.

(TI): - because the word Paramount.

(MH): Right. There is a parallel universe, where I stayed at Paramount or I stayed at Technicolor. And here's exactly why I left. This is gonna sound so random, and fantastical. It absolutely is just a completely different chapter of my life. But I was at Business School, wrapping up the end of the degree. When one of our last classes was business plan development, where we went and found a company and we built a business plan around it like a go to market strategy.

(TI): Yeah.

(MH): And a friend of mine from Technicolor actually came to me and said, Hey, I am making very expensive headphones out of a garage in Orange County. And it's just, it's insane. We can't make them fast enough. And we think that there's a market for like super high-end headphones. This is like, right around the Beats sale timeframe.

(TI): Yeah.

(MH): So, I was like, hey, let me take this business and run it through business plan development. And so, we built their first business plan, their first set of financials, their first like overarching marketing plan. And it was done with a team of like five MBAs as like a part of a closet capstone project. I gave the business plan back, I got an A class, it was lovely. They walked away with their first like set of financials and modeling. And then a couple months later, like, right as I was graduating, I got a phone call. And he said, from my friend again, and he said, Hey, we got a call from Atlantic Records. They want us to fly to New York City. And basically, pitch the company, company's name is Odyssey.

(TI): Yeah.

(MH): Can you go ahead and get on a plane on Friday and go do that, we really need you to raise some money for us. You can do that, right. I'm like, Oh, absolutely. I can do that. I hang the phone up. And I'm like, "What did I just sign up to do?" This is crazy. Over the next five days, I worked on a pitch for Atlantic Records, asking them for four and a half million dollars to essentially start moving this company into more of a commercial project. When I say these are expensive headphones, they started at \$1,000. And they went up from there and we literally could not make them fast enough

(TI): I looked at their website now, Yeah, they're their headphones are like you know that they're in the gaming headphones now and they do make a \$300 Gaming headphone on the low end.

(MH): Yeah

(TI): But their headphones go all the way up to \$4,000.

(MH): That is correct.

(TI): High quality control process. I looked at the quality control process that was part of my research for this interview. It is crazy.

(MH): This is and this was all part of my pitch to a very, and that was a real interesting experience onto its own, coming up with the value proposition for why should you invest in a garage based headphone startup in Southern California. And the reason why they were interested is because while TV has

evolved from standard def, to high def, 4k and beyond, the audio world has actually gone in reverse. The audio has gone from pristine recordings down to streaming music that you're hearing through garbage headphones, and you don't know any better. So, you don't know what high definition audio actually truly sounds like.

(TI): Yeah

(MH): And the whole point of the investment was help us stop making thousand-dollar headphones help us start making \$300 headphones. It takes a lot of marketing to break into that world. And the idea was that Warner Music Group, the owner of Atlantic Records and all of its resources could help us do exactly that. So, I fly to New York. I'm meeting the CEO of Atlantic Records. I'm meeting the parent company that owns both of Warner Music Group and Atlantic Records. And that of CEO Atlantic Records grabs me and he says, "Hey, so you're that you're the guy doing the pitch today. This is the first time I'm meeting my boss. So, if you mess this up, I will absolutely end you. Do you understand me?" And this is my first introduction to this individual.

(TI): Oh my God.

(MH): And I was literally going on in one minute, and the room filled with like these executives that I'm like, oh dear Lord, what if I got myself into

(TI): You went from like making little animations for Technicolor, or make a little video for them, to this. That's incredible.

(MH): Yeah, and also Technicolor thinks I am sick and not having called in sick and flown to New York City to pitch this. So, I pitch it. Halfway through the pitch the boss, who I was not supposed to screw up in front of, gets up and leaves the room. Now, I have never done any high stakes pitches of this level before, but I'm pretty sure this is a bad sign of how the pitches going. He walks out of the room, he comes back and he's now eating an apple, kind of obnoxiously loud and he says, Mark, Mark, Mark stop. And I'm like I was just getting to the good part. And he says I love it. We're doing it you are going to work with this person here and this person here and welcome to the Warner Music family. And I'm like wait, just so that I can understand, I just asked you for four and a half million dollars, and you said you're giving me four and a half million dollars. And he's like that's right, I got to go bye, and he leaves. And

(TI): Oh wow. How much of a stake was that for that \$4 million?

(MH): So, I actually lectured at UCLA. Basically, I just gave you the beginning of the story. The lecture at UCLA is all the things that unfolded between that meeting, getting the money 18 months later, and then joining you know, starting this company, and then leaving the company at a very early part of it. Again, it feels like a different life, different time. But there were a lot of back and forth about this ownership stake. And the bulk of that 18 months was fighting back to maintaining control of the company. And four and a half million, dollars 18 months later, is not as much money as you would have asked for had you known it was going to take 18 months.

(TI): Sure

(MH): So, during that process I did leave Technicolor, because my nine to five had a five to nine attached to at the end and I had to reverse those.

(TI): Yeah

(MH): And so, it was really cool to actually like leave Technicolor, saying I've been moonlighting for a quite a long time now and I'm done here. I'm going to go move on to Odyssey. And I got a lot of support from people doing that were you know excited to see this kind project kind of unfold, and this opportunity open up. So, that is why I left the Technicolor world and I went into this company, to do what every Business School person dreams of, you know, it's potential, like starting your own business and getting it funded. And that's actually never why I went to UCLA to begin with. I wanted to move up the ladder inside of entertainment, be a marketing head someday at a Paramount, etc. Which is absolutely not how that process is done. But that's what I thought when I first started going to business school. And I just knew that I had missed a lot of business acumen that my colleagues had that were never in the military to begin with. So that was kind of the impetus for where I went, I was able to use a GI bill that was terrific. And then I never dreamed of like starting a company like that ever. It was truly an amazing experience, and one that kind of catapulted me into a different direction. So, I actually left that company in 2014, after the job stopped being any bit of fun and was just everyday nonstop fighting. And it was just the opposite of the American dream. It's now in the very capable hands of Shankar who was doing an incredible job. And we still very much stay in touch. But it just wasn't the right fit for me. I left the military to do something in entertainment. And I wanted to go back into that. And that's when,

(TI): Gotcha

(MH): I happen to cross David Gale, and We Are the Mighty.

(TI): Yeah, so you were looking for a way out? As far as from business development and that sort of thing. And how did you go back to telling military stories?

(MH): So, David Gale, who had spent 18 years inside of the Viacom beast. Most of the last of the late part of those years was running MTV Films. And David was responsible for I think, 28 films and these are the national treasures that are Beavis and Butthead Do America. All the Jackass movies, Pootie Tang, Napoleon Dynamite, Kings of Comedy, like an Election and Varsity Blues. It's like the Halcyon of those MTV Movie days that that have come and gone. And while David was there, he had a big target on his back because everyone wanted to be the head of MTV Films. They were having such like runaway success, because MTV the channel, was curating, and providing an audience to market to at a fraction of the cost than any other studio had to release a film. They had the inside track on it. You want people to go see Napoleon Dynamite? Put Napoleon Dynamite on TRL. It was as simple as that. You think people are gonna go see a Jackass movie? Well, statistically, we would say that this could transition quite nicely into a movie franchise. So, David saw this, and he started getting content sent to him by friends. So, we're like, Hey, can you get this military veteran band on MTV? And David's response would be, you haven't seen MTV in the last 10 years. We stopped doing the whole music video thing a long time ago.

(TI): Thank you, Teen Mom.

(MH): Yeah, right. Now, it's just *Jersey Shore* and *Teen Mom*. Both quality programming, but much different than most of the original. Yeah. But this is interesting that the military is like creating content creators and storytellers. And David saw this opportunity to create a brand wrapper for the military community. And in 2014, he set out to create, *We Are the Mighty*. And I got a chance to meet with him. I had just left *Odyssey*. I was trying to figure out okay, I'm now painted with the consumer electronics brush and no longer the entertainment background. I was getting that as feedback. Like, I'd go for a job interview at like Fox, and they're like, you sell headphones. What are you going to do here? I'm like, No, I don't I have a very long background in the entertainment industry. And they didn't want to hear it. So, I got a chance to meet David. And David wanted to hire me as a video producer, as a low-level video producer. And I said, David, I love what you're doing. But I think that I will not best serve you as a video producer. I haven't done that since combat

camera. And although I'm positive, I could pick it back up and do an excellent job with it. You are never going to meet a veteran with combat experience in basically photojournalism, who is deployed, who has gone through the entertainment industry on both the studio side and the post-production side, who has gone to business school, has gone into a startup experience raising money and getting it. I'm a little bit like a unicorn for you. I can do more than be a video producer. And he and I like parted ways. And two months later, he called me back and he said essentially like I want you to help me run the company

(TI): Strong.

(MH): It was great. Yeah, I'm shocked that I was that ballsy in that interview to basically turn down a job, tell them what I needed to really be doing instead and essentially convert that to what was kind of essentially the COO role in the very beginning of the company. So, I was there when it started on day one. Essentially, when we flip the switch to start, WeAreTheMighty.com. That was November 11, 2014.

(TI): Very good. Now you've been the third veteran from *We Are the Mighty* that have spoken with Blake Stillwell, of course, my old TA. And David Tenenbaum being the other two. Great interviews in our archive. If you get a chance, go check them out. Again, all airman. Where they there at the beginning as well.

(MH): So, I called Blake and said, Bro, I know you're working for the Near East project right now. And I'm sure you love it. We have an opportunity to really start building, creating stories and content around the military community. And I want you to do this with me. And he left his job he flew out here. And so, he came in probably a year into it. He came in I think in 2015.

(TI): Gotcha.

(MH): And I listened to Blake's interview with you. He you know, was and still is one of our most like prolific writers. He helped us set and define the tone. And you use this kind of BuzzFeed meets the military. That's the same. That's the same analogy I've used for the longest time to be able to kind of explain what *We Are the Mighty* is. You know, he helped us with a lot of that content in the very beginning. David Tenenbaum came in, I think 2017 timeframe when we were expanding sales team. And he was brought in to help us kind of help coordinate more on like the VSOs side. And to be a support for that sales machine that we were ginning up at the time.

(TI): Yeah

(MH): Keep the lights on. So, they were there in the early years, but the company has changed quite a bit in the almost six years. It's been in operation at this point.

(TI): It seems like there's almost a different focus almost every year, you know. There's a lot of people in this space, like Task and Purpose, now Coffee Or Die's coming on, I see, you know, some focus on short form, some focus on long form. Now, it seems like you guys kind of very broad in terms of media. You do short form, long form, blogging, some articles, blogs that aren't necessarily military centric or veteran centric, but are topics that veterans take an interest in. Like certain films or sports or what have you. You produce television docu series YouTube content. Blake had a podcast at one point, all kinds of stuff. For you, what is the status of the military media community industry going in to 2021?

(MH): Yeah, it has been a wild ride over the last six years for sure. And you're right to notice that there are a lot of content providers in the space and that's actually a good thing that actually demonstrates to the rest of the world that there is an audience to serve.

(TI): Absolutely.

(MH): And each one of us do this in a different way. [Military.com](#) [Link] is more of a Resource Based entity that serves news.

(TI): Yep.

(MH): *Task and Purpose*, is you know, slightly left leaning news organization that does parallel us,

(TI): More journaling sometimes, it can but more journalism, right.

(MH): Yeah.

(TI): Military Times is kind of like our legacy tabloid. Right

(MH): Right. Yeah. And *Coffee or Die* is doing like really cool more or longer form journalism as well. And they've got some incredibly talented individuals over there. We serve the community in sort of this, like socially driven micro

content. And we'll touch on trending news, but we're not the entity that is going to be breaking news. So if you find yourself looking for breaking news on wearethemighty.com [Link], you have found yourself on the wrong publisher.

(TI): Yes.

(MH): But we were started as an entity to, in our DNA, an entertainment focused company. That's charter was to find, identify content that we could level up into longer form, into TV and film. And then to be able to use our *We Are the Mighty* social media and the website as basically what if it's analogous back to MTV, the MTV channel to the MTV Films. But the world has changed quite a bit during this timeframe. And the publishing world is one that's extremely challenging to survive and even thrive in.

(TI): Yeah.

(MH): So, we have irons in a couple different fires and have refocused over the years. But we you know, we have gotten to the point where we have a tiny, tiny, toe hold in Hollywood with the creation of that series that we finished, called 10 Weeks. And with a movie that we sold to the company that basically does all the John Wick films called Thunder Road and, so we have a movie script out there. So, a movie potentially happening someday. And then that other show 10 Weeks was an incredible collaboration with the United States Army and production company called Blumhouse. That does a lot of horror, predominantly for Universal, did the Purges and Get Out and things of that nature. And the now defunct Quibi, is who paid for all that. We were actually supposed to launch on November 9, the 10 Week series. But if you've seen the news in the last couple of days, they're going to shutter the service.

(TI): Yes

(MH): Which is disappointing to not get the show put out on that platform. But could potentially have a silver lining, because it is a good show. And we could potentially find a different distribution partner out there. And we're going to start that process with Blumhouse. Assuming that Quibi doesn't find a home for it.

(TI): It's back in. Okay, so Quibi still kind of owns it right now. But it could potentially come back into the ether.

(MH): It could. And the signs are kind of pointing to that direction right now. But time will tell what happens. So, it was an opportunity for us to follow five new recruits from the beginning to the end of the 10 weeks of Army boot camp. And because we're following five unique individuals, we see sort of like in American Idol, we see some of the background behind these individuals, their driving focus and then there are challenges inside of boot camp, as they go through that whole process of Army combat training. So, it's a really cool look for anyone who's interested in what, you know, traditional boot camp looks like. And it's a way for even people like myself, who went through my own Air Force version of that. I don't know what the army process looks like. I've always been fascinated to understand that myself. We think, we've got a little something for everyone there. And the army sees that as an opportunity to be able to showcase to younger individuals, what that is and to maybe demystify it to a degree and make it a little bit more accessible. So, it's a kind of a recruiting endeavor for them.

(TI): You got some you got some support from the service as well.

(MH): We did. The army was incredible. One of my team members, Chase, Millsap was able to help coordinate all of this between the different production entities, and then in the Army itself, to the point where we had, I'm not kidding, we had a three star general call the office and say, Hey, this is Jim from the Army. Not this is Lieutenant General.

(TI): Exactly.

(MH): And, like I need to talk to Chase, and get Chase on the phone. And he's like, I hear you're trying to make a show about boot camp. Let's do this. And there are a lot of other things that have to happen in between all of us, including a Medal of Honor recipient going to bat for us.

(TI): Oh, wow.

(MH): A whole bunch of things. That was Colonel Jack Jacob. All incredibly helpful in the flywheel that got us into the actual end of the production. So, it was incredible to watch, the Army actually moved very quickly on giving us carte blanche access there. And then their ability to kind of help us create the story. To tell it the right way.

(TI): Sounds like you're really close to your goal, taking that micro content that was on, you know, blogs and YouTube and now you're actually being able to put

that together to fund larger content, like what you're doing. That's outstanding. Is there a revenue stream that maybe I'm not thinking of when it comes to content creation? You know, we talked about whether web ad revenue, organic platform show ad revenue, selling shows YouTube ads, of course, YouTube ad before, were probably good before they change the way they paid out. What am I not thinking of as a way to make money off content?

(MH): You know, you are thinking of, I would imagine all of it, and all of it is so hard to justify the cost of creating and then to monetize. The way the company keeps the lights on is through advertising and branded content, helping connect companies to the military in an authentic way as possible. So, we primarily live off of that advertising revenue. And it's a lot of how can we optimize the amount of content we're creating, versus the amount of money or revenue that it generates. And so, moving into TV and film is something that's extremely hard to do, because we don't have the types of development budgets that a studio could potentially deploy on creating a good idea.

(TI): Yeah.

(MH): So, it's really as scrappy as we can get. That is something that if lightning strikes, and we've had just enough success, that, you know, we can see bigger projects on the horizon.

(TI): Yeah.

(MH): It's still something that we very much have to like, look in the mirror every day to make decisions on, you know, continuing to pursue. But we've got some incredibly talented individuals, and we've got some great ideas. So, we are still full steam ahead on this.

(TI): You dealt with a lot of content for the past six years. What content do you see out in our military community, that you think our audience responds to or engages with the most.

(MH): You know, you see what the Black Rifle Coffee guys and gals have been able to do. And they really have, you know, incredible personalities behind the content that they create, to sell that brand, so effectively, and so well.

(TI): Yeah.

(MH):

You know, the community really cottoned on to the brashness of some of that type of marketing. It's incredibly well done. It's very funny, very purpose driven. And it's the type of irreverence that the community really likes. That TV has their own niche, that they've carved out of the very bordering R, NC17 rated version of very dark military. Yeah, very veteran humor. My company, I have said this kind of before tongue in cheek, we're kind of like the Disney of the military community with respect to, we don't lean into politics at all, we don't lean into the part of the world that would, you know, make, it's the kind of stuff that you would be proud to show your mom and dad on any level. And it doesn't resonate with, you know, with everyone it is, you've identified this, were more of like, a broad subset of the content that people consume. So, we're doing like Military History listicles, and articles about our heroes, weapon systems, etc. We're basically kind of generating the content that is for everyday connection to the military community. And that's predominant our focus. And that's what kind of allows us to operate into different like shows and things of that nature. We had one show that kind of, was like the only thing that kind of bordered into that world, which is dumb military questions. That's where civilians ask us dumb questions about the military, and we tear them apart for doing so. I really appreciate the news that *Task and Purpose* is putting out there. That team works incredibly hard and you know, it has become a real serious entity out in the space. And I really like a lot of the digital series we've created that many people don't know about. We have done probably about 12 digital series over the course of these six years. And some of its even branded content for companies. But we've done shows for the purpose of doing shows. We sold six to the also defunct GO90 platform that Verizon put out. And so, we've got some really cool shows that I'm extremely proud of that we'd love to keep continuing and we'll continue when we find the right Brand Partners to be able to produce them.

(TI):

Gotcha. Very good. With [blogs.va.gov](https://www.blogs.va.gov/Vantage/) [Link: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/Vantage/>], with Vantage Point, our strategy pretty much is to be the lead news on Veterans issues and Veterans information. And we really appreciate the fact that *We Are the Mighty* syndicates a lot of our information because its government funded. So, it's open to anybody, anybody could share it. And but we really do appreciate that you guys do that.

(MH):

Absolutely. And we will continue to do that. It's you know, it's part of our charter here to help connect the military community to the resources. And the VA is an incredibly important part of that. And we're here to help you get the news out as well. Your podcast is absolutely incredible. It's shocking, and also not shocking. You know how well it's doing and the people you're getting

connected to and the people you're able to highlight out there. So, this would also be another piece of content that is super important. I'm glad the VA is allowing this to happen the beginning and is able to give you a platform as well, to reach so many people and its incredible work that I hope to see continue into perpetuity.

(TI): That's a big endorsement. I really appreciate that. Thank you.

(MH): Absolutely.

(TI): Well, we've covered a lot of ground. What is one thing that you learned during your time in the military that you apply to what you do today?

(MH): Yeah, I think that there's two things. One thing I didn't do as much that I wish I did. And the other thing that I do all the time now, probably to the chagrin of much of my staff. But, you know, attention to detail was really drilled into my head in specifically the combat camera timeframe. We brought in a commander that showed up right, and he was the first of the traditional communication officers that would then go on to like, lead the squadron. The ones before that were all from the old guard. They were visual information officers; they were people that had storytelling in the background. And this new guy came in, and prior to being the commander, he was a finance guy. And I say that because he was so far removed from any sort of creative process. He came in, and he was asking questions from day one, about production and about the way storytelling is supposed to happen. He took it upon himself to go through classes. And anytime a video went to him, it was shocking how precisely capable he had become of pulling it apart, finding mistakes, and looking for things that we had to adjust in a positive way for the onset of everything we were doing. And I remember videos coming up to my level that I would have passed in previous timeframe, because they knew the workload was so much, and it was good enough for government work. But he held us to a different level of standard. And it was something that really, I think, was good for the process as a whole and kind of taught me the value of, if you take the time to do it right the first time you save yourself a lot of time down the line.

(TI): Very good. This is kind of the first time I've ever asked this question. But what would, I don't know, one veteran life hack be that you've learned since getting out, that you'd like to share with other veterans that may be in the process of that transition?

(MH):

Yeah, maybe this is not a shocking response. But being a veteran, admits you to a very special club, for better or worse. And I am always very eager and happy when I learned that someone has donned the uniform or has been in part of the military community in some way, shape, or form. I would say utilize that veteran card to help others that are in this space that are trying to learn about things. You know, those organizations out there, like what David Tenebaum is working on at Heroes Linked. What Veterati initially set out to do, or what organizations like veterans and median entertainment are, you know, helping connect people in very specific ways. And I would say just don't be afraid to reach out and utilize it because more often than not, the person on the other side is going to be extremely happy to help or offer advice, or to make connections. That wouldn't necessarily happen from someone just kind of blindly coming in off the street asking for help, right. It's a way for our community to help itself, help each other. Don't be afraid to ask for help. You'll be surprised at how much help you'll be giving to someone else down the line.

[01:31:01] Music

[01:31:42] CLOSING MONOLOGUE:

(TI):

I want to thank Mark for coming on *Borne the Battle* to talk with us. For more information on Mark, you can go to wearethemighty.com/author/Mark [Link]. Just Mark.

Our *Borne the Battle* veteran of the week comes by the way of our veteran of the day program. Every day, our social media team highlights a veteran on our social media platforms and on [blogs.va.gov](https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/) [Link: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/>]. You can nominate your own veteran of the day by sending photos and a short writeup in an email to newmedia@va.gov.

Kenneth Bottoms joined the Air Force in 1968 after graduating from Texas Tech University with a degree in electrical engineering. His first assignment was to improve the reliability of inertial navigation systems of B-52 bombers and air-to-ground missiles. That's a heck of a first gig. These were used in Vietnam at the time of Bottom's service. Bottom's work on this project for two years. During the second half of his service, Bottoms collaborated with the worldwide airborne command post to work on the Boeing EC-135 aircraft. He also designed and tested the first mini computer installed in an aircraft. These microcomputers provided communication with ground mainframe computers. Bottom's

had the opportunity to present his work to general officers at the Pentagon and received an Air Force Commendation Medal for his efforts. Bottoms left as a captain after four years of service. That's a heck of a lot of accomplishment in four years. After his service, Bottoms that worked as a civilian engineer. He eventually went on to work in management at three different Fortune 500 companies. Bottom's retired from business and in 2005, started a ministry for incarcerated veterans with fellow veteran, Charles Smith. The ministry helps to organize veterans incarcerated groups inside of Texas prisons. Through the groups, veterans can receive training to reenter society and learn skills through leadership and participation in committees. Today, Bottoms lives in Grand Prairie, Texas. He is a member of the Vietnam Veterans of America and the American Legion. Bottoms is also the former president of the Greater Dallas area chapter of the National Association of Uniformed Services. Bottoms also served as a court-appointed special advocate for foster children in Tarrant County courtrooms. Air Force veteran, Kenneth Bottoms. Thank you for your service.

That's it for this week's episode, if you yourself would like to nominate a *Borne the Battle* veteran of the week, you can. Just send an email to podcast@va.gov [Link], include a short writeup and let us know why you'd like to see him or her as the *Borne the Battle* veteran of the week. And if you like this podcast episode hit the subscribe button. We're on iTunes, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts, iHeartRadio pretty much any podcatching app known to phone, computer, tablet, or man. For more stories on veterans and veteran benefits, check out our website, [blogs.va.gov](https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/) [Link: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/>] and follow the VA on social media. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube RallyPoint, LinkedIn. Deptvetaffairs, US Department of Veterans Affairs, no matter the social media, you can always find us with that blue checkmark. And as always, I'm reminded by people smarter than myself to remind you that the Department of Veterans Affairs does not endorse or officially sanction any entities that may be discussed in this podcast, nor any media products or services they may provide. Thank you again for listening and we'll see you right here next week. Take care.

[01:35:23] Music

[01:35:53] SAVED ROUNDS:

(TI): Now, what we do sometimes, we have basically the back end of a show, we call it after the show show, because for over a year, I didn't know what I was going to call it. Now it's called Saved Rounds. So,

(MH): Cool.

(TI): This is your Saved Rounds. Is there something maybe humorous from your military time or in the life that you've lived that you'd like to share?

(MH): I mean, I have a funny story from a deployment. Is that kind of something you'd be looking for.

(TI): Absolutely, that's exactly what we're looking for.

(MH): Korea, 2004. I'm with the Lieutenant who will be taking over my job. We are running a war game from inside the hardened Tactical Air Center in the middle of Osan airbase. And this Lieutenant, Mike Stucky, is cut from a different cloth, I'd say, from anyone else I'd ever met. He was an academy grad, who had so much at the time of a disdain for being in the Air Force itself, that he operated in a very different way. Now, he was very good at his job, but he really just was I think done drinking the Air Force Kool Aid. He also knew he wanted out the second he could get out. Because of that, he kind of like was little more jokesy than many other people. And I loved every second of it.

Commented [WN1]: Not sure about spelling

But there was one time, where he really shook things up. So, it's 24-hour ops, we're on the night shift. Again, essentially our job is to tell the 3000 people that have been deployed for this wargame, and this wargame is about what would our response be if North Korea attacked South Korea. And so, we have 3000 people on the Peninsula, Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force in a smaller capacity. And we're running this program to move people around in a virtual space, telling people when to put on their gas masks because they'd been hit by this missile etc. And it gets a little sleepy at night because operations kind of slow down. And there was a room of like 24 individuals from E2 all the way up to O6. And they have different jobs and they're all kind of working together, but again, it's night so it's a little more quiet. Stucky says to me, Hey, I'm headed down to the Taco Bell, because apparently, we have a Taco Bell in the middle of Osan airbase. Do you want me to get you anything? Yeaaaa, surprise me. He leaves, he's easily gone for an hour, I have no idea what he's doing, I thought maybe he just went home and went to sleep or something. So, to get into this particular part inside this building called the H-Tac, you have to go through so many levels of security, there's a cipher lock on the outside of the door and you could hear a pin drop right now. And I

hear the cipher lock start to click, the 3 numbers it needs to click open up. So, I hear it get to the point where it is to be opened. And instead of opening gently, like everyone does, Stucky kicks the door as hard as he can to open it. He runs into the room and he's holding a soda from Taco Bell, it's a Mountain Dew and he screams, Harper, did you order the code red, it's a Mountain Dew Code Red. And everyone has now snapped to attention, some people have like screamed and gassed, Colonel is now staring at us like, what are you 2 clowns doing? And I'm trying to read the room, at the same time, I can't let this good bit die, so I scream, you're God- right I did. And so, I yell that, the colonel jumps up and says, Stucky, Harper, out now. And he pulls us out, and he says, Jesus that was funny and I think we needed it. But you have to pretend like I read you the Riot Act because that was inappropriate, you both understand me? And Stucky's like, I have no idea what you think we did wrong. I simply delivered the Code Red as instructed by my superior officer.

(TI): Still going with it. That's outstanding.

(MH): He was never one to back down, never wanted to back down. So, you know, we walked in, tail between our legs, proverbially, and I think that story sat with that deployment for a couple years to follow.

(Text Transcript Ends)